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A ḤIMYARITE ARTEFACT IN THE PARTHIAN-SASANIAN STYLE*

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The object I wish to present in this special publication in honour of Professor Giovanni D'Erme is regrettably up for sale on the market for antique objects from the Yemen. Like all artefacts brought to light in clandestine digs, this means it is destined to enter a private collection and disappear from scholars' view. A series of coincidences have made it possible to establish that this figured bronze plaquette was part of the grave goods from a hypogean tomb discovered at the foot of Jabal al-Ḥuṣṣn, near Ḥafār (Fig. 1). The tomb had initially been plundered by the local inhabitants, and was subsequently excavated by Paul Yule.¹ The horse's noseband in bronze with silver intarsio work turned up by the German archaeologist (and now conserved at the Museum of Ḥafār) has both technical and stylistic affinities with the plaquette that I happened to see and photograph this spring in the *sūq* of Ṣan'ā' (Fig. 2). Confronting the two objects has helped to clarify the function of my find. In all probability it was a part of a horse's harness, rectangular in shape (approx. 15 × 6 cm.) with spayed corners, only the lower right one being partially conserved; the front is decorated and the back plain (Fig. 3). Each of the short sides culminates in an inlaid tubular ring which must have contained a ring holding the decorative plaquette with the rest of the trappings.

This remarkable object is unique in Southern Arabia, both for the technique used in its manufacture and above all for the subject featured. The decoration was done using a special technique of intarsio, damask work, in which different colour metals are combined to obtain certain designs and adorn the artefact.² In this case, slips of silver lamina were cut to fit the

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² MARYON 1971, pp. 148-160; GIARDINO 1999, pp. 91-92.

shapes that had to be covered up and cold hammered into the recesses of the bronze base, specially prepared with specific figures and the internal features incised. The silver slips were fixed in place by means of tiny rivets, cunningly disposed so as to form integral parts of the design, thereby fulfilling at the same time both a practical and a decorative function. In fact these pins form the eyes of the horsemen and the animals, the hocks of the horses and dogs, the decoration round the hem of the cloak and the leaves of the vine. The damask technique, a common feature of Egyptian and Cretan-Mycenean art, came back into fashion in the Hellenistic and Roman period for encrustations on furniture and vases, and to highlight the eyes, lips, diadems and hems of garments on bronze statues.

This Yemeni object appears to have had a gilt finish, traces of which can be detected on the lowest register and also in the left-hand panel and on the back of the plaque. The technique of gilding by firing (also known as “mercury gilding”) was practised from the Hellenistic era onwards but did not enter into common use until the Imperial age, in the 2nd or 3rd century AD. Two methods were used: either mercury was spread on the surface and covered with a slip of gold leaf, which appears to be the method used in this frontlet, or else an amalgam of mercury and gold (obtained either by pulverising the gold in a mortar with the mercury, or heating it up until the two elements blended) was spread over the surface of the object, which was in turn exposed to a source of heat to make the mercury evaporate, leaving the gold coating.³

The designs are disposed in three horizontal registers, with each scene framed by a herringbone surround. The upper and lower registers show a hunting scene with dogs. An ornamental motif comprising a bowl on a flared stem with two vineleaves sprouting from each side of the vase (Fig. 4) separates two identical scenes in mirror image: a hound, fangs bared, is seen leaping on a gazelle, which is fleeing towards the centre of the panel; at either side one can see the legs of a human figure, presumably the hunter moving on foot (Fig. 5), whose body must have occupied the splayed corner. Regrettably the silver slip which covered the figures of the gazelles has been lost, but we do have those on the two dogs, featuring the anatomic details of the muzzle, musculature and rib cage. The same scene is repeated in the lower register, but at either side, behind the dogs, we see the trunk of an archer, bow bent as he takes aim at his quarry (Fig. 6). The details are not

³ LINS-ODDY 1975, pp. 365-370; GIARDINO 1999, pp. 96-97.

clear since the intarsio is completely missing and the figure is broken off at the height of the torso.

The two main panels in the middle register are separated by two monograms which we shall discuss below and which help to date the artefact.

The same design appears on each panel, featuring two horsemen confronting each other on rearing horses (Figs. 7-8). The horsemen's head and legs are seen in profile but the torso three-quarters on, so that we see the chest of the left-hand figure and the back of the right-hand one. Each rider holds a lance in his right hand, and presumably the reins in the left. In the middle of each panel, low down between the horses' hooves, a human figure is lying on his back, his arms up on either side of his head; both figures are facing towards the middle of the frontlet, thus forming a mirror image.

Although it is not in a good state of conservation, since most of the silver foil covering the figures has disappeared, we can nonetheless identify the details because they remain indented in the metal. There are substantial differences in the dress of the two horsemen: the one on the right wears tight-fitting chainmail armour covering arms and legs to the ankle, while the one on the left seems to have a tunic with transverse folds over a pair of breeches also marked with creases. Both have a cloak billowing out with the impetus of the horse, but the cloak of the figure on the right is plain, with no folds. The helmet worn by the left-hand horsemen is more rounded than its counterpart. The intarsio of the horses is only conserved for the left-hand ones, and shows the muzzle, musculature, mane and also the bridle and saddle, consisting in a tasselled rug (horse on the left). The fact that the intarsio is missing means we are unable to say whether the horses on the right were modelled in the same way or whether they too wore armour like the horseman. It looks as though the wounded combatants on the ground were carrying a quiver.

From the technical point of view the design is linear with flat figures aligned on one plane and little grasp of perspective. While there is a feeling for detail, the artefact is devoid of realism, the topics of hunting and combat on horseback being shown in panels designed exclusively on the basis of symmetry; in particular the combat between horsemen was based, as we shall see, on an Iranian model and adapted for the local clientele by inserting Himyarite monograms.

Scenes of combat involving horsemen-warriors such as the one on this Ḥimyarite artifact are extraneous to the art of Southern Arabia,⁴ while this did feature hunting scenes involving bow and arrows, with the huntsman on foot (hunting with a lance involved huntsmen mounted on camels). There is only one object, a fragmentary architectonic element conserved in the National Museum of Yemen at Ṣan‘ā’ (YM37), which features the iconography of a horseman in a heraldic position (Fig. 9), like those on the object we are presenting. The horseman is seen with head and legs in profile facing left, so that the torso is seen from behind, as the figure charges, lance in rest. The cloak is lifted by the horse’s movement, as is customary, and it is triangular in shape with stiff, slightly bowed folds, exactly as in the left-hand horsemen in the scene of combat on the frontlet.⁵ On the left there is another figure, badly damaged, which seems to be a feline animal, popular in Southern Arabian iconography of the Ḥimyarite period. The motif of the vine tendril with leaves and bunches of grapes sculpted in the intrados of the same architectonic element, which also features in the plaquette, is another very common decorative element in architectonic reliefs of the Ḥimyarite period. Adopted from Greek and Roman art, the vine tendril appears to enter the Southern Arabian decorative repertoire in the 2nd century AD, associated with putti, birds and tritons, probably imported via Syria. In the 3rd century the same motif is simplified and stylised, with the relief flattened, and the iconography points to the Parthian-Sasanian culture of the late 3rd- early 4th century AD.⁶

⁴ To judge by the few works of art found to date, the horse was introduced into the iconography of Southern Arabia relatively late. In his *Geographia*, Strabo of Amasia (64 BC-24 AD), in a passage (16.4.2) based on Eratosthenes of Cyrene (died circa 195 BC), affirms that horses and mules were virtually unknown to the population of the lands opposite Ethiopia. It seems that the horse made its appearance from the 2nd-1st century BC with the aggressive raids into Jawf by the nomad Arabs. However, already in the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, a sort of sailors’ manual written in Greek in the mid-1st century AD, the anonymous Alexandrian author states on two separate occasions that among the goods unloaded in the ports of Muza and Cana there were horses to be delivered to kings and dignitaries (ROBIN 1996, pp. 61-62). The oldest mention of a horse in an epigraph dates from the end of the 1st century AD, in an inscription from the reign of Karib‘il Bayān, king of Sheba [Saba’] and dū-Raydān (ca. 85-90 AD). In the 1st century there are few mentions of horses, and always in a military context, but they increase progressively over the following three centuries, when they come to be counted not singly but in tens (3rd century) or hundreds (4th century). Cf. ROBIN 1996 and RYCKMANS 1963.

⁵ COSTA 1978, pp. 44-45, fig. XXVa-b.

⁶ PIRENNE 1957, p. 117.

In the 4th century one still finds stylised motifs, including vases and rosettes, but the presentation becomes more fluid. According to J. Pirenne, the vine has a symbolic rather than a decorative significance, and can be associated with the cult of the Southern Arabian god Almaqah on account of the ritual vase.⁷

The iconography of the horsemen is particularly interesting, both for their dress and for the design with two figures facing one another. The right-hand horseman can be readily compared with a Parthian terracotta slab in the British Museum showing a *clibanarius* killing a lion (Fig. 10),⁸ where however the warrior, although armed with a lance and wearing a helmet, has no cloak. Both mounted and foot soldiers wearing armour and brandishing lances are to be seen on the monument celebrating Trajan's victories over the Sarmatians (Fig. 11),⁹ and also in the graffiti of Dura Europos (which show the influence of contemporary Parthian painting); here there is a striking image of a soldier on horseback, with both man and beast wearing chainmail.¹⁰

The left-hand horseman appears to be wearing Parthian costume, like the horseman in the moulded bas relief in the Louvre (Fig. 12),¹¹ even though the latter is not wearing a helmet or armed with a lance. The two topics found on the plaquette – combat between horsemen and hunting – were both of some significance in Parthian art, for hunting scenes recur frequently in frescoes, stucco work and the Dura graffiti.

Turning to the mirror image composition based on a combat between two horsemen, there is a most striking iconographic analogy with Sasanian reliefs. This topic is found in the rockface reliefs of both Naqš-i Rostam (north of Persepolis) and Firūzābād (city founded by Ardašīr I). In combats between horsemen wielding lances, the horses are generally represented at «full gallop»¹² and the defeated horseman lies unhorsed,¹³ as can be seen for example in the victory scene of Ardašīr I, founder of the Sasanian dynasty, over Artaban V, last of the Parthian kings, carved into the rock in the mountain defile leading to Firūzābād. The scene of combat on horseback with the defeated en-

⁷ PIRENNE 1957, p. 125.

⁸ GHIRSHMAN 1962, p. 106.

⁹ VON GALL 1990, fig. 20 b-c.

¹⁰ GHIRSHMAN 1962, p. 51.

¹¹ GHIRSHMAN 1962, p. 104.

¹² VANDEN BERGHE 1984, pp. 139-140, nr. 72, fig. 30.

¹³ GHIRSHMAN 1962, pp. 118, 131.

emy lying face upwards at the feet of the combatants shows a clear affinity with a relief of Bahrām II (276-293 AD) at Naqš-i Rostam (Fig. 13).¹⁴

The bow wielded by the archers, bent in the middle, seems to be the one used by the nomads of Central Asia that became common from the 2nd-3rd century AD.¹⁵ Hunting scenes with this type of bow are found in precious plates of the Sasanian period¹⁶ and also in rockface reliefs from the 4th century onwards. The fish scale pattern framing the figured panels recurs in the stucco mural decorations from the Sasanian era where we also find the rosette motif which decorates the tubular rings protruding from the short sides of the plaquette.

These details, together with the design of horsemen confronting each other, are all iconographic motifs taken from the figurative production of the Sasanians, with whom the peoples of Southern Arabia were in contact even before the Ḥimyarites called on them to expel the Abyssinians from their territory (570). On the strength of the close analogies with Parthian and Sasanian iconography, we would consider the 4th century AD as a *terminus post quem* for dating the Ḥimyarite artifact.

The epigraphic study carried out by Christian Robin gives rise to two distinct hypotheses concerning the identification of the dignitary referred to in the first monogram (the second features the name of the palace). On the basis of this study it appears that the artefact can be dated to the 5th century AD.¹⁷

¹⁴ VON GALL 1990, fig. 10.

¹⁵ I would like to thank Professor Bruno Genito of the Università degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale" for his valuable suggestions.

¹⁶ GRABAR 1967, pp. 47-48, and figs. pp. 18, 90-96, nn. 1-3, 5, 7.

¹⁷ South Arabian monograms comprise a set of letters which generally make up a name. This may be the name of a person or a lineage, an epithet or the name of a monument; more rarely the monograms comprise all the letters of two names, for example the personal and the epithet. Sometimes it may represent part of the letters of a proper name or a symbol with just a few letters. The analysis of a monogram does not identify immediately all the letters used, since some of them may merge into an element belonging to another letter. For the study of these monograms I am particularly indebted to Christian J. Robin, Directeur du *Laboratoire des Études sémitiques anciennes*, Paris, Collège de France. The detailed analysis of the two monograms from the plaquette together with those present on the noseband discovered by Paul Yule will be published in the second issue of the journal *Arabia, Revue de Sabéologie – Rivista di Sabeologia* (Institut de Recherches et Études sur le Monde Arabe et Musulman, Aix-en-Provence – Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente, Roma), Paris (De Boccard).

There are nonetheless various questions still to be answered concerning the contents of the combat scene, the artisans who produced the object and its provenance. When one considers the care that went into the representation of the combatants, shown in contrasting dress, one can imagine that they are intended to represent two different people. It is however difficult to establish whether the combat scene represents a historical event (for example the war between Parthians and Sasanians) that was given a local significance (such as the conflict between Ḥimyarites and Abyssinians), or if a foreign stereotype was adopted purely for its decorative potential. A second question closely connected to these considerations is that of the object's provenance. It is not possible to establish whether it was made locally or imported to Zafār. If the latter hypothesis were valid, the title of this paper should read "A Parthian-Sasanian artefact made for a Ḥimyarite cavalrman".

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VON GALL 1990

H. von Gall, *Das Reiterkampfbild in der iranischen und iranisch beeinflussten Kunst parthischer und sassanidischer Zeit*, Teheraner Forschungen, Deutschen Archäologischen Institut Abteilung Teheran, Band VI, Berlin, 1990.

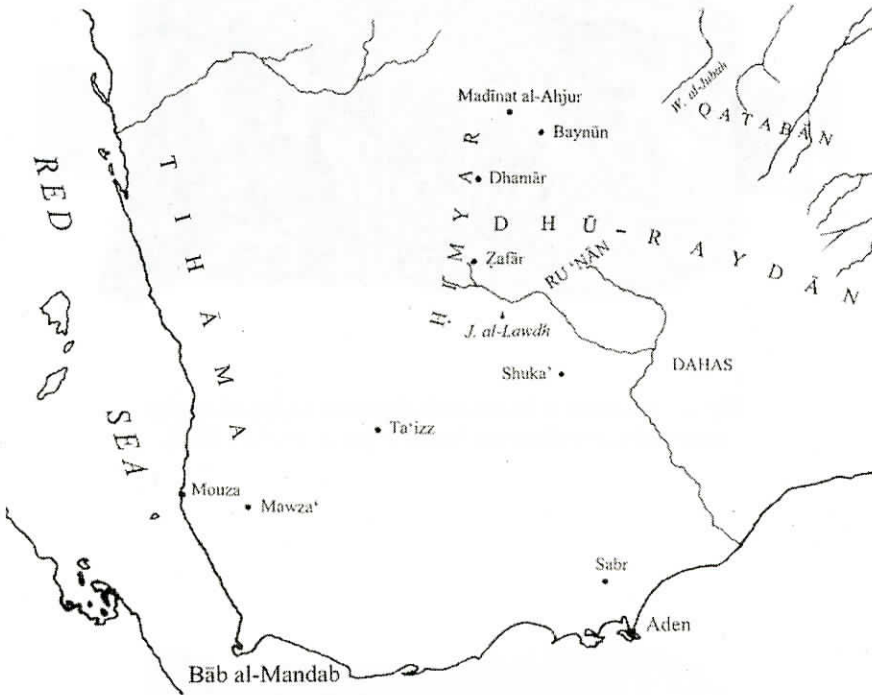


Fig. 1 – Map of Southern Arabia.

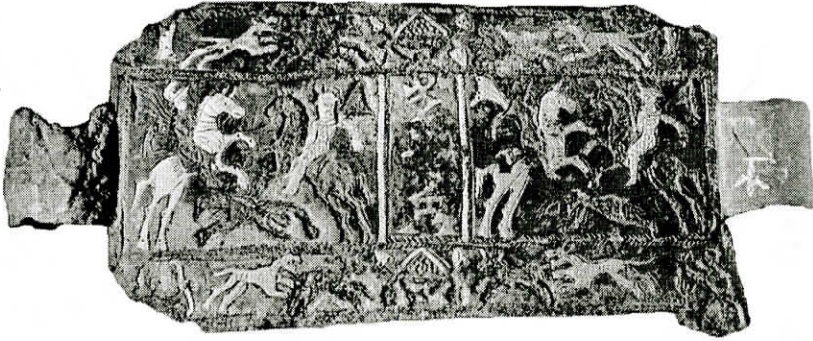


Fig. 2 – Plaquette in bronze and silver with scenes of combat on horseback and hunting (seen on Şan‘ā’ market, 2004).

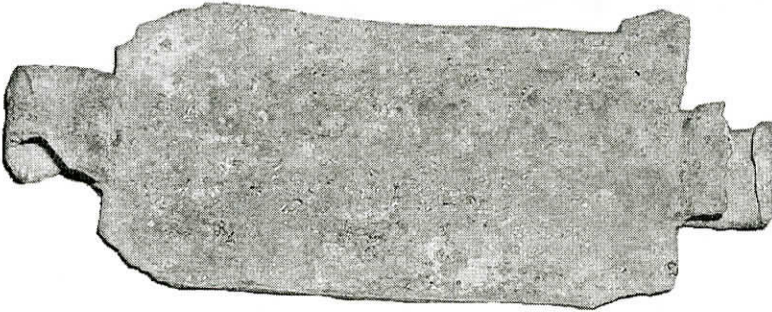


Fig. 3 – Back of the figured plaquette.



Fig. 4 – Detail of vase with vine tendrils.

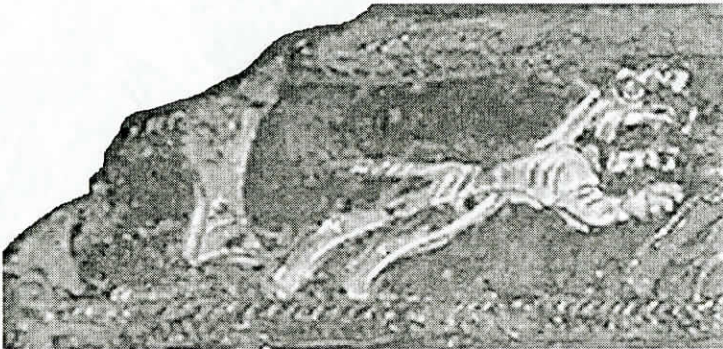


Fig. 5 – Detail of hunting scene, top left.

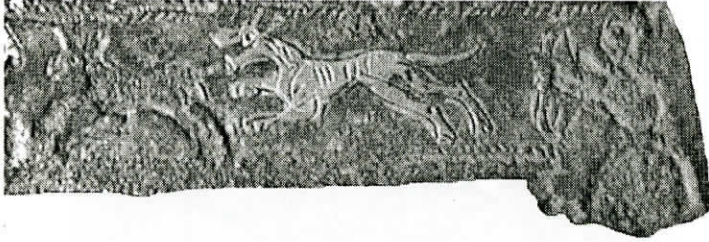


Fig. 6 – Detail of hunting scene, lower right.



Fig. 7 – Combat on horseback, left panel.



Fig. 8 – Combat on horseback, right panel.

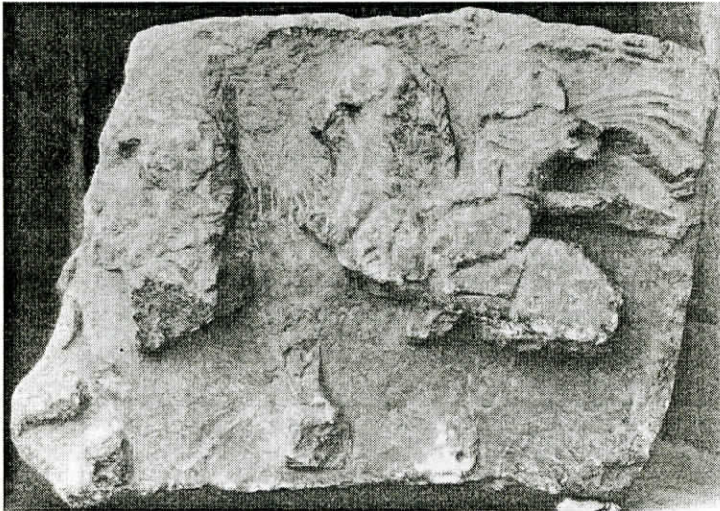


Fig. 9 – Architectonic element with horseman in relief,
Yemen National Museum, Ṣan‘ā’.

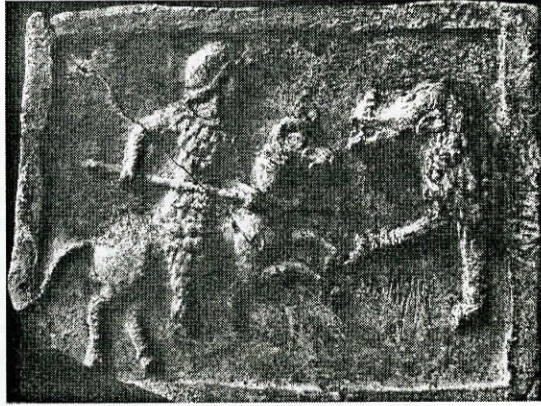


Fig. 10 – Terracotta slab with *clibanarius*, British Museum
(from GHIRSHMAN 1962, p. 106).



Fig. 11 – Sarmatian soldiers and horses wearing chain mail carved on
Trajan's Column, Rome (from VON GALL 1990, fig. 20 b-c).



Fig. 12 – Bas relief with Parthian horseman, Musée du Louvre
(from GHIRSHMAN 1962, p. 104).

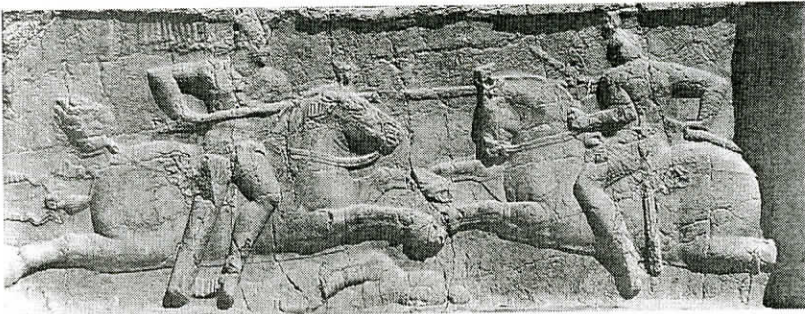


Fig. 13 – Scene of combat on horseback of Bahrām II at Naqš-i Rostam
(from VON GALL 1990, fig. 10).